

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year
 Trinity Church, December 19, 2010
 Matthew 1:18-25

My favorite Christmas carol is *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Phillips Brooks' thoughtful words lift the birth of Jesus out of the particulars of history and translate that tender human scene into a spiritual condition that embraces all of humanity across all of space and time -- a universal frame of mind and heart.

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light
 The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

Hopes and fears. Bethlehem is the place where hope engages, confronts and contends with fear.

The manger scene is a tender one, the stuff of Christmas cards and Sunday-school pageants; but its tenderness and serenity disguises an insistent undercurrent of fear. Why else would the angels' messages, again and again, be, "Do not fear." In this whole story of Christ's birth, every time God's messenger speaks, the first word is, "Fear not! Something wonderful is happening."

I have taken liberties with the rare and beautiful crèche that stands in front of the pulpit. From time to time we have made that manger scene into a kind of Christmas drama. The Holy Child still doesn't appear until Christmas Eve, and sometimes the Kings were not in place until Epiphany, which is when the magi were supposed to arrive at Bethlehem. Today, I have dared to put aside all the human figures except for Mary and Joseph. I do that because I need to focus all our attention on just those two people: lonely people, fearful people, a man and woman caught up in the whirlwind of immense events on earth and in heaven. Their response to the situation, their individual characters and the quality of their relationship with each other was what, in the wisdom of God, set the conditions for Jesus to emerge as the Savior of the world.

Mary, the mother, takes the central part, and rightly so. She accepted a role that to all outward appearances was ambiguous and dangerous; and she didn't simply surrender passively to what was in any case inevitable. She took the announcing angel at his word: "Don't be afraid. God is with

you!" She accepted her condition actively and joyfully, in spite of all its risks, all of its physical difficulty and public embarrassment, as a gift from God. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my heart rejoices in God my savior!"

Mary's role was basically determined by the inevitabilities of motherhood; but Joseph's situation was more complicated. For today, Joseph, his character and his faith is the focus of the Gospel.

We don't know much about Joseph's life; but the Gospel lets us know volumes about his character in just the few lines where he is mentioned. To explore all of that would take us in too many directions for a sermon. But from what the Gospel tells us, we know that he was "a righteous man." That is, he knew and obeyed the Jewish law. In one sense that was his agonizing problem and the root of his fear.

We can understand Joseph's anguish and confusion when he learned that his intended bride was expecting a child, and with the information at hand there was only one possible explanation. The expected child was the result of an adultery. That was not an unprecedented situation, either in their day or ours; but in ancient Judea, the law posed an agonizing choice on the husband-to-be. Joseph was a law-abiding man. Family honor and prestige were at stake. The engagement, under the law, had the legal effect of marriage, so it gave Joseph the right and the difficult responsibility of deciding how the issue would be settled.

Joseph had three choices and none of them was good. He would have known that by law Mary could be stoned to death in defense of the family honor. The more common solution in Joseph's time, was to get a public divorce, and that would be almost as bad as stoning, because it would condemn the woman to a life of poverty and shame. The least hurtful option was simply to void the marriage contract privately. There would inevitably be gossip, as old wives counted off the months on their fingers. Both families would suffer. But that is the direction Joseph chose as the least of evils. And none of that even took into account the future of the child himself or herself.

As Joseph wrestled with these anguished options, he had a dream. People under stress often dream and the dream can be an avenue for God's message. So in Joseph's restless dream, the angel said, "Joseph, son of

David, do not be afraid ... do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Notice the language: "Do not be afraid to do this thing. But the final decision is your own."

The quality of Joseph's faith and courage was his decision to take the immense risk and go where God was leading him; not down the avenue of law and retribution, but down the path of human kindness. A lesser man might have taken the safest route: a quiet divorce and tough out the consequences. Certainly, God was at work, but how was Joseph to know for sure. It was all faith: Joseph's faith in God, and God's faith in Joseph.

Hope and fear. Those are the two conditions that operate in all of the ambiguities of life. Reflection and prudence, law and tradition, desire and courage, all play their part in helping us decide what we should do in the midst of our confusion, but in the long run we all have to fly by the seat of our pants, hoping that out planning has been intelligent, our intentions pure, and our faith true. We have to decide if and whether we have heard God's message correctly, and on that decision we stake our lives and the lives of others. Joseph chose to believe that God had spoken to him in and through his personal anguish and told him not to be afraid. His decision to act on that word, asking for no guarantees, is the mark of his faithfulness. Could it be, can it be, also the mark of ours?

Bethlehem is the place where hope contends with fear; and Bethlehem is here with us. There is awe and wonder here in this place. There is majesty and mystery. But I find that also, for me, in this blessed season there is an overshadowing of something like fear. I have little actually to fear, so it is more a sense of the need of others, people right around us, who have much to dread. I'm influenced by a poignant story that Cynthia Jones told me a week ago. She was a Salvation Army bell-ringer at Coborn's grocery during their holiday food "tasting." Families, many of them single-parented, were coming clearly for the food in whatever tiny niblets, children thinly clothed in temperatures approaching zero. In a gut-wrenching irony, at an elegant party Friday evening, someone who works at the Food Shelf described to me the parade of misery that passes through those doors. In conditions like these, fear contends on unequal terms with shreds of hope. It is the same with the lonely, the sick and the old. How can I, how can we, be the beacon of hope that Christ calls us to

be? How can we be the angel voice that says, "Do not be afraid? God is at work here and his faithfulness is true and everlasting."

The words of the carol come back again and again, O little town, the hopes and fears of all the years converge in this very place. Yet in these dark streets, the everlasting Light shines undimmed. Can it shine in you? Can it shine in me? Can it shine in us?